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Testimony re: SB 296: *An Act Concerning Visitation Between a Parent and a Child in Cases Involving the Department of Children and Families*

Madam Chair, Mister Chairman, and members of the committee, I am submitting this written document in support of SB 296, "An Act Concerning Visitation Between a Parent and a Child in Cases Involving the Department of Children and Families" to ensure continued contact between parents and children when those children are removed by the Department of Children and Families. I had worked at the Department of Children and Families from 2003 to 2005 and often had to advocate for regular visits for parents with their children. I would find opposition by supervisors and managers to such visits. I also advocated placement of children with their biological families when reunification with the parents was not appropriate. I graduated with my Bachelors in Social Work in 1980, achieved my Master's degree in 1986, and am a licensed clinical social worker. I worked in social services in state, municipal and private agencies since 1981 and serve as an advocate pro bono for indigent families.

Too often children are denied access to their families at the whim of state staff who do not have the education or proper training to make such decisions. From a clinical perspective, it is usually in the best interest of the child to maintain contact with his or her parent or parents and certainly with other family members, such as siblings, grandparents, etc. I have personal experience with DCF disrupting visits to "punish" parents because either they didn't do something DCF required or may have missed one or more visits

because of transportation, illness or some other reason beyond their control. Visits are scheduled at the place and time of convenience for DCF, even when the parent states that such place and time makes it difficult for them to attend or arrive on time. Then when the parent is late or can't come, DCF uses that against parents to stop visits. There is no consideration that there is a bond between the parent and child and that these procedures are detrimental to the well being of children in the care and custody of DCF.

I applaud the proposed changes that hopefully would discourage arbitrary decisions to suspend or terminate visits knowing that DCF would have to go to court to enact such decisions. In addition, in such cases when they do file papers in court, the parents will have an opportunity to present their side to the judge to maintain weekly visits. In the current system, the parent's attorney must file a motion in court to reestablish visits. I currently know a case where I have advised a parent to ask her attorney, and I have actually requested her attorney, to file motions for visitation, increased visitation and unsupervised visitation, and the attorney never did so. The parent has been requesting another attorney for one year, and the judge finally approved her request. I have advised the mother to file a complaint against the attorney.

My experience with DCF is that children are removed much too easily from their families, particularly in Bridgeport, and the burden is placed on families to show why the children should be returned when the burden should be on the State to prove why the children can't be reunited. I also have seen positive information on the families omitted on legal documents and DCF employees provide false testimony about parents and family members to keep children from their families. Statistically we know that children who grow up in foster care or institutions are much more likely to become incarcerated as

juveniles and adults or develop chronic mental illness. The Department tries to blame this result on the biological family, when in fact the blame rests with the Department. The human cost and the cost to taxpayers is too great to allow the current system to prevail.

Hopefully, either this bill will be amended or another bill introduced to provide not only weekly visits, but also mandate visits with siblings and other family members and mandate a minimum of two-hour visits with parents on a weekly basis at the parents' home, with gradual increases in frequency and duration on a monthly basis. Perhaps these changes will encourage the Department to accelerate reunification or placement with family so children's lives are disrupted as minimally as possible or, better yet, cause them to use removal as a last resort after all other interventions have been exhausted.

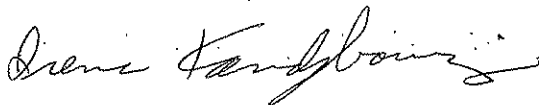
Children who are removed from their homes are confused and don't understand why they are kept from their families and friends. While there are wonderful foster parents, and I personally know families who are foster parents and who have adopted children, most foster parents cannot provide the love and nurturing that a biological family can provide. Children are kept as prisoners, not being allowed to live normal lives. In one case I had at DCF, I discovered that the children were abused severely in foster care and DCF had covered it up. The Department did not place the children in therapy and no action was taken against the foster parents. (Biological parents would have been arrested for the behavior exhibited by these foster parents.) I was told to lie about the mother in court documents. All of this was about power and control to prevent the children from talking about what happened to them. When I refused to comply, my supervisor and program

supervisor harassed me, and I ended up resigning from DCF so I could better advocate for the family. I complained to the DCF reviewers and wrote a lengthy letter to the Regional Director. I even wrote to the Child Advocate's Office. The Director never responded, and the only response I received from the reviewer and child advocate office was "we know this goes on" and "we're studying this problem and working on making things better." I asked how many children will continue to suffer while you are "working on it?", but I did not receive a reply. Even though I believed and still believe the best place for the children is with the mother, I also supported the concurrent plan of placement with grandparents. DCF wanted to split up the children. I testified against DCF (and for the children and their family), and the children were placed with the grandparents. DCF lied and the AAG lied during the proceedings. For example, the judge had allowed unsupervised visitation during Thanksgiving. I was present when the family was together at one of the children's aunt's home. The cousins were asking if the boys could stay overnight, and the mother had to tell them that the court only approved the day visit. When the children were asking how they could be with their family, I said that they have a lawyer and they can ask their lawyer to ask the court. The children asked the foster parent to help them write a letter to their lawyer, and the foster parent informed DCF. Well, the AAG used this against the mother and made it sound as if the mother forced the children to write a letter. This is only one example of how the Department distorts the truth in order to "win." And what has to be remembered, the Department does not fight so the children win, it fights so the Department wins, regardless of the harm done to the children and their families.

I hope that more is done to investigate DCF and its treatment of children. I have many examples of the injustice done to families and the harm inflicted on children by the Department. As much as I support changes in legislation and subsequent policy, laws are only good as long as they are implemented. Parents and children are not informed of their rights, and who will oversee to ensure the Department complies with these regulations? I hear too often of situations where the Department staff lies to parents, and I tell them their rights and advise them what issues to bring up with their attorneys or refer them to the Child Advocate. Parents are reluctant to file complaints for fear of retaliation by the Department. There needs to be a change in philosophy that presumes children are better off with their families than with strangers.

Thank you for your attention, and I hope and pray for the successful passage of this legislation.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Irena Kandybowicz".

Irena Kandybowicz, LCSW, MSW, MA

